Note by LMB: This was a travel memoir I wrote shortly after I returned from my 2000 trip to St. Petersburg. Reading it over a decade later, I find I'd forgotten many details; I now wish I'd done one of these for all of my overseas trips, instead of just this and the one from the Croatia trip. Rather like carrying a camera (which I don't) and taking snapshots–"Who *were* those people?", except that the memoir records just that.

Russian Impressions, September 2000

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The first thing I would note is that the Russian Federation, as currently constituted, is a nation eleven time zones wide. I saw one city: St. Petersburg. This is, I'm told, like paying a visit to San Francisco and thinking that one has seen America. I will therefore try to avoid too-broad generalities in what follows.

I was invited to be a guest speaker at the Congress of Russian Science Fiction Writers, which (like much in Russia these days) is a fairly new organization. Like many other enterprises in the former Soviet Union, it is getting its legs under it. This was the fifth of their annual conferences, an occasion for writers to meet and talk, and honor the excellence of the past year in Russian publishing. To that end the conference has created the Strannik Award, which they aspire to have be the Russian equivalent of the Nebulas. There is also, I was told, a new annual science fiction convention in Moscow, which is also in the process of developing a reader-voted award to be a Hugo-analog.

After much last-minute scrambling and many cranky and hysterical e-mails to my host and guest liaison, the very patient Mr. Cyril Korolev, I finally had tickets, visa, and passport in hand. On Monday September18 I took plane from Minneapolis to Chicago, there to catch an Aeroflot flight to Moscow and a plane change to St. Petersburg. Unfortunately, the plane was four hours late taking off, due to having to wait for the second flight crew to arrive, who had been delayed in transit. (International aviation safety regulations require any flight over a certain duration to carry a relief crew to take over once the primary crew has passed their maximum number of hours on duty.) I must say, when they finally did show up, they were a very nice looking bunch, the ladies trim in their red uniforms, the fellows the typical trio of distinguished-looking senior pilot and rather handsome juniors, co-pilot and flight engineer. I like Russian faces, which fall into several recognizable types, and look, well, Russian.

We got away eventually. The plane was a Boeing, as are a number of Aeroflot's international fleet, and the food was the same

Chicago airline food I'd had on my trip to Madrid, so I didn't win on either seating or food over American carriers (I'd been hoping). The in-flight movie was the first of several rather surreal moments: it was a Russian-made American Old-Western! It was comedy-drama. I can offer no better description of it than to quote verbatim the in-flight magazine.

"*A Man From Caputsins Boulevard*, 1987. At the dawn of cinematography someone named Mr. First–a missionary of The Film–arrived in a little cowboy town. He started showing first movies to the tough guys who turned to be very sensitive and touches. But not everyone in town likes that…" Story: E. Apokov. Director: A. Surihova. Starring [and rather delightfully, I might add]: A. Mirnov, M. Boyarski, O. Tabakov."

I would sum up my Aeroflot experience as, "No worse than Northwest Airlines." I would not hesitate to fly Aeroflot international again. Note to some potential customers: Aeroflot still allows smoking in a section of the plane on their flights, and tends to have seats available on short notice at quite competitive prices. I sat in the non-smoking section, and was not bothered by smoke even though I'm mildly allergic to it.

Due to my late departure from Chicago, I missed my connection in Moscow. But my hosts, three women from my Russian publisher AST in Moscow–my Russian translator and two junior editors–waited faithfully some six hours in Sheremetievo-2 Airport. They were still there with a sign in their hands with my name on it and a rather wilted rose (it, and they, had been all fresh at noon), when I at last stumbled out of Customs and into the airport at 6 PM Moscow time. I had called my son from Chicago and had him e-mail Cyril in St. Petersburg when I knew I would be late, but it hadn't helped much; alas, the message had not caught up with these faithful ladies, so they'd ended up waiting the whole time. Jet-lagged, I ruthlessly threw the problem of my missed connection onto them, and we all piled into the car (with driver) waiting to take me to the domestic airport, Sheremetievo-1.

There, they miraculously got me a seat on a jam-packed evening flight north; we had a short time to sit and chat before the flight, and they bought me tea, bless them. The domestic airport has the atmosphere of a shabby bus station, with many frantic travelers trying to crowd through a physical and checkpoint system that's much too small for the load. While temporarily difficult, upon reflection I take it as a good sign–it means that a lot more Russians can afford to fly now than the designers of that airport had ever imagined would. My editor also handed me color photocopies of the cover for the Russian edition of *A Civil Campaign*, just that weekend being released; I hope my website can get scans soon. The Russian artist chose Kareen and

Martya's bug butter battle as the scene for the front, which amused me considerably. Miles's red lightflyer appears on the back.

Being in Russia, where I did not speak or read the language, was rather like being an adult illiterate who has had an aphasic stroke. Not being able to understand or communicate was strange and scary, and it gave me a much keener appreciation of the emotions of visitors and new immigrants struggling with English in this country.

After an uneventful one-hour flight, and god knows how many hours awake (I can't sleep on planes), I arrived at St. Petersburg's Pulkovo Airport, where Cyril and a colleague met me with roses and a car, and whisked me off to the hotel. The first building we passed out of the airport was the St. Petersburg Coca-Cola bottling plant... The hotel was the Sovetskaya, built in Soviet-era modern style. My room was small–singles there actually have a single bed–but very clean. I collapsed gratefully.

Next day, I crawled out of my room at about noon, and my hosts took me on a general tour of the city. St. Petersburg looks tremendously old-world, but actually is younger than New York or Boston. It was founded by Peter the Great in 1703, on rather soggy land recently won/won back from the Swedish, to be Russia's northern port, and very shortly, northern capital. We drove around a couple of great Russian Orthodox churches and several notable monuments, and then strolled around the Summer Gardens on the banks of the Neva, and visited Peter's first little Summer Palace–more of a house, really. This was later replaced by edifices for which "grandiose" is an insufficient term, but here was preserved a bed he slept in, some of his clocks including one with a frame that he helped carve, and other fascinating historical objects. We also visited the cruiser *Aurora*, now moored on the river, which when new had participated in the famous 1905 defeat in the war with Japan, and from which the first shot was fired that opened the Bolshevik Revolution.

After lunch in a delightfully collegiate café, we strolled around the island fortress of Saints Peter and Paul, and then squeezed in a visit to the apartments of the famous Russian poet Alexander Pushkin. (Early nineteenth century–think Lord Byron-era.) Like Byron, Pushkin also managed to get himself tragically killed at the early age of 36 or so, in his case fighting a duel. His office is preserved much as it was, and includes among other memorabilia a cane he had made with a button from one of the coats of Peter the Great set in the top. Also on display are some of his rough drafts, including doodles. I wondered if he was left-handed, for all the faces in the marginal art face left.

Then we were off to my first bookstore signing, at Nevsky 72. Quite a nice number of fans showed up, and I began to get my first glimpse of just what is happening with the Vorkosigan saga in Russia. The short version is, Miles is making a heck of a lot of friends in places I never dreamed of when he first swaggered onto my pages

back in 1983. Interesting fans at this signing included a woman judge, and a shy young lady who pressed a ceramic dragon upon me and vanished before I could think to take her name. A reporter also did an interview during the signing, and of course asked me what I thought of Russia. Since my experience of Russia was mere hours old at this point, I'm afraid my answer was rather incoherent, but I hope she got enough good material. Then it was back to the Sovetskaya, dinner, and bed.

Next day Alan Dean Foster and Robert Jordan and his wife Harriet had arrived, and we were all taken off for an all-too-brief tour of the famous Hermitage, one of the world's greatest art museums. We saw an overwhelming fraction of its treasures. I'd seen the Prado in Madrid earlier in the summer, and the grandiose Bourbon Palace there; the Hermitage was like both rolled into one. I won't even attempt to describe it all; take yourselves off to the library and get out some giant art books with lots of glossy color photos on the subject. We were then taken for lunch to a chamber that looked like a ballroom out of a Georgette Heyer novel, mysteriously set with food waiting for many. After a period of confusion where we sat wondering what we were supposed to do, eat or wait, the rest of the mob from the conference showed up by a bus, a mode of transport we were to grow very familiar with as the weekend went on.

Alan Dean Foster, who had visited Russia thirteen years ago, said one of the notable differences was the appearance of advertising. All the familiar logos, from Lee Jeans to McDonald's (this, at least, in Cyrillic) were in evidence. While they gave an encouraging sense of a healthy economy, I couldn't help wondering how Americans would feel if their streets and shops were colonized by hundreds of ads in Cyrillic. My favorite billboard in St. Petersburg was the one for Kit-e-Kat cat food. It showed a tabby cat, made gigantic by its foregrounded perspective, in an Olympic stadium leaping its kibble dish on the track, paws and claws out–the head of the cat was on a cut-out board a little in front of and above the rest of the board, striving for a 3-D effect. One felt mouse-sized, staring up at it. My provisional conclusion: Russia needs more exports to balance this influx, culturally as well as financially.

Then it was back to the hotel, then off to the opening ceremonies, held at yet another location (I spent five straight days lost, never quite certain where I was or where we were going next, or, sometimes, why.) This was either city offices or part of a university, I wasn't clear which, but it had an auditorium. I was whisked away to a classroom-looking room before the ceremony began for a television interview (!), and sat out another part in favor of some more interviews and conversations. All of this communication was courtesy of, and via, several volunteer translators, who worked very hard for

us; shoving the complex ideas we all wanted to convey across the language barrier was a challenge and a strain. After that, we all were taken by the bus back to what we Americans finally decided was a restaurant, and another meal was served, this time a stand-up buffet with vodka and champagne. I kept thinking of that scene in the Horatio Hornblower novel, where he sails to St. Petersburg and has his first, confusing encounter with Russian dining–I'm going to have to re-read that one soon.

Anyway, everyone got pretty convivial after a few toasts, and things started to loosen up. I prudently stuck to the champagne. I had a nice chat with some Russian fans, Ekaterina and Anna, who showered me with gifts including a hand-made bag in the Vorkosigan colors full of gold-foil covered chocolate coins–with the heads of actual Russian emperors on them. They also gave me a spiffy ceramic bottle of vodka in the shape of a Cossack on a horse, with the note attached referencing the life-sized sculpture of a guerilla soldier done in maple sugar Gregor had as a wedding present from the people of the Vorkosigan's District in *A Civil Campaign*. (They've made a website in Russian devoted to the Vorkosigan saga. URL : http://lavka.cityonline.ru/bujold.htm Its home page has a mirror in English, that one may access by clicking on a link further down.) Live and recorded music led to dancing, and at last one brave Russian writer asked me to dance too, which started a trend–for about fifteen minutes, till I ran out of breath, I got to be the belle of the ball. So what if I had to wait till age fifty… One of the fellows was a ballroom dancer, and made me look great for a turn or two.

Next day was the main event of the conference, The Panel–just one, on the topic of wars of the future. It was a bit chaotic, partly due to problems with translation format, but mostly because it tried to pack five hours worth of stuff into a two-hour time slot. All three of the American writers had been told they were to give a speech on the topic; we all three showed up with material that would fill a typical one-hour US convention slot. No one had quite realized that non-simultaneous translation was going to more than double the time for everything. By the time I was asked to cut my remarks down to seven minutes, we were already boarding the bus for the auditorium.

First up was a real Russian admiral, whose main concern seemed to be wars of the present; he spoke much on the subject of international terrorism. Since the translation was a fellow sitting next to me whispering, and we sat in the front row, I will not attempt to convey my fractured perceptions of what all the admiral said. Alan Dean Foster did his best with his remarks. A Russian academic also spoke. I'm pretty sure that what he said could not have been nearly as baffling as what I heard. (I still don't understand the part about the bees.)

What I had in hand would have taken me about seven minutes to read–in English, with no interruptions. Instead, we all ran over time, and rather stepped on each other. There was a small riot in the audience when the poor harried moderator, desperately trying to get things under control, cut me off about three pages into my seven pages. Acceding to, er, popular acclaim, I instead handed it over to my translator to read most of the rest of what I'd written, something I should have done about two pages earlier. I felt a bit like that British correspondent who apologized for having written an eight-page letter, because he hadn't had time to write a four-page one. Robert, learning quickly from our mistakes, wisely handed his speech over to his translator right after the first paragraph, and got through pretty handily. The most frustrating part was the fact that the question and discussion part, often the heart of these sorts of things, had to be ruthlessly cut off. But, in a cloud of confusion, we all scrambled through to the end somehow, and went off–in the bus–to lunch back in the ballroom.

After dinner, Robert Jordan and I were taken off to a book signing at St. Petersburg's largest bookstore, "The Book House," opened in 1923. It is just around the corner from the monument to Nikolai Gogol, and across the street from the splendidly neo-Classical Kazan Cathedral. It has three sales floors, plus offices, and like all the bookstores I saw in Russia, it was jam-packed with customers buying books. We signed books like mad, answered questions from readers, had another television interview, and signed more books. After that, we went off for tea in one of the back offices with the bookstore managers, and they took photographs of us on the balcony overlooking Nevsky Prospect, where, we were told, Russian poets used to read poetry to the crowds below. The crowds below today were more interested in getting home through rush hour, I thought.

Lots of traffic, lots of cars, by the way. The streets are bumpy, but it's not a question of the Russian economy–it's the hard winters. Thus speaketh a resident of Minneapolis (me), where our two seasons are dubbed road removal and snow repair. It gets even colder in St. Petersburg than it does here, and the winters are at least a month longer, if not two. Maintenance in a climate that harsh is no trivial task. There were plenty of people out during the day, and lots of beautiful, well-dressed women. And a lot fewer street beggars and panhandlers than I see in the US, I might add. (The girardia outbreaks in the tap water, however, cannot be excused in a twenty-first entury city that aspires to world status.)

Then it was back to the hotel. After that, we were all taken off for another buffet and beer/vodka/wine party at a place called Elagin Island Pub, which featured among other things pool tables; the writers had a good time, and I believe Alan acquitted himself nobly on

the, er, field of felt. I had another good taped interview/conversation with some writers/fans/journalists.

Next morning after breakfast, I squeezed in a taped interview with one Alexander Royfe, who is a critic and writer for a literary journal in Moscow called *The Book Review*. (I now regret not keeping more extensive notes of everything that went past me, especially people's names.) Then it was back aboard the bus to the Gogol Monument, just around the corner from the Book House on Malaya Koniushennaya Street. This street has been turned into a broad and pleasant promenade for pedestrians. There at Gogol's bronze feet we were treated to a street-theater production which, since it was all in Russian, I didn't exactly catch despite sporadic translation. The main speaker was dressed as the Strannik, the Stranger, a character I came to understand better later that evening, with a bodyguard of four folk characters in costumes that would have done credit to a Worldcon masquerade. Pantomime play with music and voice-over followed, witnessed by the motley mob of us writers, passing tourists and children, and one scruffy-looking fellow who came out on his balcony in his bathrobe and stared down at us in mild disbelief for a while, shook his head, and went back indoors, possibly to stick his head under his pillow and try to return to sleep

The playlet included a performance of someone dressed as the Nose from Gogol's story of the same name (which I have not yet read, but gather from context to be a sort of early Russian magical realism/absurdist piece). The folk creatures dressed the statue of the writer temporarily in a large blue cape. When the coat was taken down at the end, it was cut up on the pavement, and anyone who could come up and name one of Gogol's characters was offered a piece. I could not do so, alas, but since I was a guest I received one anyway.

Then it was off to a book fair for another signing. This turned out to be a large building–somewhere in St. Petersburg–that has a daily book market rather resembling a cross between a Worldcon dealer's room and a flea market. Many booths sold a vast assortment of books and other items. Customers filled it wall to wall. We pressed through the crowds to an area in the rear where a table had been set up, and had a brief Q&A session, and a very active signing session. Fortunately, the Russian editions of *A Civil Campaign* had at last arrived. My senior Russian editor from AST, Nickolay Naumenko, had also arrived, and assisted, looking pretty happy, I must say. (AST had contributed sponsorship money to the conference, as had other publishers and some governmental sponsors.)

Due to another slight gap in communications, I had not realized a meal was planned for after the signing; I had already promised a group of Russian fans (spearheaded by Anna and Ekaterina again) that they could take me out. I have no idea what all I missed, but I

blew off the book fair people and went with the fans, feeling a trifle guilty. They did very well by me, taking me to what they called a Russian barbeque place just down the street from the hotel called "Ohotnichya Izba"–it turned out to be shish-kabob. It looked like a hole-in-the-wall sort of place, but it turned out to be the best food I'd yet had in St. Petersburg. A glass booth at one end of the restaurant held a long metal trough with a charcoal fire, over which the chef cooked your order as you watched. We had an extremely good conversation, courtesy of our volunteer interpreter.

Then it was time to go back to the hotel and dress for the Strannik Award ceremony. This was held in another amazing St. Petersburg interior, an old composer's club. The chamber to which we were led had some of the most beautiful carved woodwork I'd ever seen, including a musicians gallery all around with a spiral staircase up to it in one corner. A marvelous portrait of Mussorgsky glowered down from one wall–the man looked startlingly like the late British actor Oliver Reed, except very pale and rather hung-over. Speeches and presentations followed, broken up with classical music played on a harpsichord by a superb woman musician from Latvia named Aina Kalnziema. Since we'd been told to dress formally, I wore the same silver-on-black dress I'd worn to the Hugos last month in Chicago, and Alan managed a nice sweater; Robert shone us all down with a tuxedo and blinding waistcoat. Harriet was spiff in a flowing red silk coat.

The Stranniks are quite the best looking literary award I've ever seen. They are heavy cast bronzes of the Stranger, dressed in a hooded cloak with sword and staff and a raven on his shoulder, striding out. They'd be a substantial piece of desirable art even if they weren't a prize. They leave the World Fantasy Award's metal heads of H.P. Lovecraft (aka "the world's ugliest prize") in the dust. A number of categories for Strannik Awards included ones for art, translation, short story, and novel.

So there we American guests all were in the front row, enviously coveting our neighbor's goods, when the presenters called us each up and gave us our very own Stranniks. We all blurted out rather surprised thanks. The ceremonies concluded, and we all repaired upstairs to another large chamber for another abundant buffet with vodka and champagne, and lots of talk. (My Strannik now has a place on my mantle next to the Hugo I won for *The Vor Game*, and very classy it looks there; the art print of a St. Petersburg winter scene has found a spot on the wall in my front foyer. Amazingly, I managed to get all the gifts home unbroken, including the porcelain cup and saucer, the ceramic dragon, and the Cossack vodka bottle.)

Back at the hotel at last, I hung out in the lobby bar for a while. So there I was at midnight on Saturday, drinking fizzy mineral water and chatting with a full-blooded Tartar computer programmer from Something-kzstan… he spoke three languages, Russian, English, and

two dialects of Arabic–but not, he informed me rather regretfully, Tartar. We both, it turned out, had cut our SF teeth on the same Eric Frank Russell stories, and the Tartar reported himself very pleased that NESFA Press had brought these old favorites back into print.

Somewhere in here, I also did a digital video recorded interview for a Russian website-cum-magazine, caught on the fly in the hotel lobby. It's going to turn up in some sort of streaming video format, I expect, eventually. The young man had strange hair, but a very impressive portfolio of materials from his site.

In the morning another panel was scheduled, a formal Q&A with the three American writer guests, in a conference room on the top floor of the Sovetskaya. Picture windows in the elevator foyer gave a fine view of the city. Alas, we had a late start as the hotel had lost the key to the conference room, but eventually someone came and opened it. The panel went swimmingly once it finally got started, at last getting some conversation with the writers, and I regretted that we ended so soon.

However, it was time to dash off to the next treat: a tour of the Peterhof, the Russian Imperial summer palace on the shore of the Gulf of Finland, across the water from the city. The grounds are Versailles-era lavish, with what is probably the most astonishing collection of garden fountains in the world. The place was badly damaged in WWII, but is now much restored. (Among the many things I regret not having time to cram in was a visit to the museum of the siege of Leningrad/St. Petersburg.) Again, I recommend a visit to your library's oversized book collection–words can scarcely convey the fascinating, indeed, appalling, opulence of most of these Imperial venues. The gardens are now a favorite place for St. Petersburg residents to go for a stroll on Sundays; our guide, who was old enough to have gray in his hair, told us the tale of being taken there as a child, and having his boat go down the drain of the Pyramid Fountain. A family crisis was averted when his father ran around and rescued it at the outlet. Four hours barely sufficed to explore just the grounds; the interior of the palace had to be forgone.

Alan had to go off to his signing at the bookstore at Nevsky 72; I was captured and carried off by the fans again, in this case members of a military history club from Moscow. We repaired to someone's hotel room, and talked for an intense and interesting hour. (More information on this club seems to be available on Anna and Ekaterina's Russian website mentioned above.) Then Cyril came and collected me to sign books for the hard-working organizing committee members.

After that, we–the American writers, the musician guest Aina and her husband, Cyril, and some of the committee–were taken to an extraordinary dinner, courtesy, if I understand correctly, of one of the convention's sponsors. It was held in the former home of a Countess,

and again I expected Georgette Heyer or at least Leo Tolstoy characters to walk through the door at any moment. The several-course meal was served by marvelously self-effacing and attentive waiters. Competitive toasting ensued. Carried away, I too rose to the occasion. Since Alan and Robert had already thanked the committee and praised the city, I offered a toast to the readers, without whom none of us would have our dream jobs. Robert was unfortunately seriously exhausted by this time, and had to leave early; Alan and I stayed on, to be treated to some wonderful music on a pianoforte until that moment merely decorating the far end of the chamber. The Latvian lady's rendition of Mozart's "Turkish March" had us clapping along and cheering. At last, things drew down; it was time to repair to the hotel and pack for my 5 AM departure. I'd traveled with one carry-on bag; by this time, with all the presents, the volume of my possessions had about doubled, and my suitcase zipper was parting company with itself.

The return flights on Aeroflot were without hitches or delays this time. My AST ladies again met me in Moscow, and saw me safely from the domestic to the international airport; we had time to converse a bit about the state of Russian publishing. AST as a company, after a shaky start, now seems to be doing quite well, producing many more titles.

Looking back, I regret that I did not get in quite as much conversation, or rather, listening, with the Russian SF writers as I would have liked, although our time was about as packed as it could hold. Russian SF seems to have a strong native tradition, a voice of its own on which to build; it's not just imitation American/British SF. A number of writers there appear to be getting respectable print runs and good sales. Interestingly, there were very few women writers in the crowd. I eventually came to realize that in Russian SF, the seventies had never happened. In American SF, this was the period when women writers emerged in force, and as a force to be reckoned with. The Russians still have more than a tinge of that '50s-'60s Boys' Own Club about them. The gender of my name is apparently even more ambiguous in Russian than in English; a number of my readers reported surprise when they learned I was a woman. AST is putting my picture on the back cover now, though, which should help–or, possibly, hurt. We'll see.

Some of my interlocutors were surprised to hear that SFWA has about one-third female members. Both the junior editors and my translator were female, but their senior editor was male; the problem seems to be the usual dual-edged one of self-fulfilling prophecy. Women writers are assumed not to sell, therefore they are not bought, therefore no woman has a chance to prove that women writers can indeed sell books. In the US market, it was first Andre Norton and then especially Anne McCaffrey, the first woman SF writer to get a

book on the New York Times bestseller list, who in my opinion broke that barrier for us. I do not know if, or how many, Russian women are trying to write in the genre. I'm put in mind of Octavia Butler's description of an encounter with a black reader, who said to her wonderingly of her work in SF, "I didn't know we *did* that." To try something, one must first envision it as possible for oneself. I'd like to hope that my success in Russia might start something for Russian women writers.

On this leg Aeroflot flew a route to Chicago that stopped, rather to my surprise, in Shannon, Ireland. I spent a couple hours staring out the window of the transient lounge at the soggy green Irish landscape, and then at last headed home, feeling that 27 hours was quite long enough for airplanes and airports. At last, after a quick triage of mail and e-mail, and an emergency call to Pat Wrede to drive me out to dinner, I fell into my own waterbed with my own cats, very glad to be home.